

Sister acts

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Facing life's obstacles can be tough, but thanks to one woman, troubled teens are now getting much needed help.

Jacqui Lang

They're not related, but teacher Jessica Brown, 34, and Joshika Kishor, 19, refer to each other as sisters. Despite the 15 year age gap, the duo regularly shop, eat and catch movies together. 'I find it hard to remember what my life was like before I met Joshika,' smiles Jessica.

The two women have vastly different backgrounds. Jessica was raised in a loving household on Sydney's north shore, whereas Joshika's young life has largely been one of pain and struggle. But thanks to Jessica – who has volunteered to be her 'big sister' – she is full of hope for her future.

'Joshika has had to cope with more hurdles than many women twice her age,' says Jessica. When Joshika was 12 her father killed himself and her devastated mother, already an alcoholic, turned increasingly to the bottle.

'I started drinking then, too,' admits Joshika, who grew up in Sydney's western suburbs. 'I'd come home from school, find one of mum's tequila bottles and drink away. I hated my life, I couldn't see a way out of my troubles.'

Bullied at school, she started avoiding classes and began hanging out with a tough crowd. The, at 16, Joshika and a girlfriend were kidnapped and assaulted. The teenage still finds it difficult to say much about that brutal time, but despite the hardships she has finally managed to make a go of her young life. 'I see a bright future for myself, whereas this time last year I saw nothing,' she says. And it's all thanks to Jessica – she's a saint.'

Jessica is the founder of The SISTER 2 sister Project, an initiative that connects female mentors with troubled teens. 'As a teacher I had seen how some students struggled to deal with personal trauma,' she explains. 'I'd go to parent-teacher nights keen to talk to parents about their child's problems but, sadly, when I met the parents I could see why there were problems. It broke my heart and I decided to do something about it. These teenagers needed a trusted voice outside the home to help them through the hard times.'

As a result, Jessica decided to recruit successful older women who could each become a 'big sister' to a teenage girl, and offer her guidance and support. She then wrote to school principals across Sydney urging them to invite girls aged 13 to 18 with personal troubles to contact her.

That was in September 2003. Sixteen girls attended her first meeting, along with a handful of successful career women that Jessica had recruited. ‘Most of the girls had been sexually or physically abused, or neglected. One girl had cut herself, one was a drug addict and several had eating disorders. When I heard some of their stories I was moved to tears,’ Jessica recalls.

At the meeting the girls were told that they weren’t alone, and that for the next year they’d be part of a program that would help rebuild their confidence and ensure someone would always be there for them.

‘At that meeting I met Joshika,’ Jessica explains. ‘I hadn’t planned to mentor a girl as I was busy running the program, but there was something so fragile and special about her I know I could find the time.’

Thanks to Jessica’s support, Joshika has now moved out of home, is studying law and saving to buy an apartment. Joshika dabs her eyes when she says: ‘I don’t know where I’d be now if not for Jessica. She helped show me the possibilities. Whenever I’d down I can phone her and she offers support and encouragement. It’s changed my whole life. I just feel more confident and able to handle things.’

Jessica says she also benefits from the relationship. ‘We’ve become very close. We meet up to go power walking, to go to cafes for coffee and cake, and even splurge on a manicure,’ she says. ‘Joshika is like an adopted sister, which is wonderful. I get a real buzz out of giving her first-time experiences – like trying sushi for the first time – and connecting her with a network of mentors. That’s very rewarding, to know I’m introducing her to helpful people.’

During the past two years more than 50 girls have been helped by The SISTER 2 sister Project, which is supported by some of Sydney’s most successful women, such as Sky newsreader Jacinta Tynan, Miss World Australia Sarah Davies, and Mercedes Benz sales consultant Belinda Yabsley. Girls accepted into the program participate in a five-day motivational boot camp and later team up with a mentor who becomes their ‘sister’ for the next year. They also attend regular workshops on topics that range from overcoming depression to learning about nutrition and managing money.

World champion marathon swimmer Shelley Taylor-Smith also plays an active role in the program. She not only talks up SISTER 2 sister in public and mentors her own ‘sister’, but also regularly motivates the girls to overcome their troubles.

‘I’ve had highs and lows in my life, but when I see what these girls have been through it humbles me,’ Shelley, 43 says. ‘I tell them, how I was disabled because of my back [as a teenager Shelley had severe scoliosis and had to wear a brace, and when she was attending college she suffered lower-body paralysis], how I was told I’d never do well in athletics, how my dad died when I was young and how a doctor told me I only had six months to live,’ she says. ‘We end up crying, and laughing, as we work through our

problems. By the end of our sessions the change in the girls is incredible. Even their posture changes, they stand tall [and are] excited about the possibilities.'

Joshika says role models like Shelley are inspirational: 'When I heard her give a speech I thought, 'She's so like us. She's had lots of obstacles but she's overcome them. What she's done is amazing.' Her talk gives me hope.'

'Shelley doesn't just give the girls motivational talks, she's a mentor to the 'big sisters', too,' Jessica adds. 'She gets involved in everything we do and helps remind me, that despite the fact we have so little funding, it will all work out.'

However troubled the young women are who enter the program, Jessica always remains positive about them. 'They're beautiful women. I don't look at their problems, I look at their potential,' she says.

Soon after meeting Jessica, Joshika found the confidence to testify her kidnapper. He's now serving a lengthy jail sentence. 'I used to be very shy, now I have much more confidence,' she says. 'Before meeting Jessica I could see my future as an alcoholic like, Mum. Now I'm saving to buy my first property and I want to be a lawyer. I feel happier than ever before.'